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## **LEBANON'S FUTURE AS A RESULT OF THE SOUTH LEBANON TRAGEDY**

Honorable Senator Sam Brownback  
Dear members of the SubCommittee

I, Colonel Charbel Barakat from Ain Ebel in South Lebanon appear before your subcommittee for the second time in three years to address the dramatic developments which have taken place in my country as a result of the Israeli withdrawal of May 23, 2000.

On June 7, 1997 I appeared before this Subcommittee to raise the issue of persecution of civilian populations in the southern Lebanese enclave which was then known as the "Security Zone" - during that hearing, I testified about the situation of the Christian communities in that enclave, warning of potential existing and future threats. I also warned against the dangerous consequences of a combination of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal, a non-intervention by the United Nations and the deployment of Hizbollah forces in that area: Consequences which would affect the security and freedom of the local population, particularly the Christians, as well as the future of peace between the two nations of Israel and Lebanon.

Let me just note that as a result of that testimony back in 1997, the regime in Beirut punished me by depriving me from my past wages and pensions I had right to. That was a personal price I had to pay for testifying to the US Senate. A contribution to the cause of truth which testifies to the determination by the pro-Syrian regime in Lebanon to deny that same truth to the American people.

And today, three years later, I report to you the developments which took place as of May 22, 2000 in South Lebanon and have affected the future of thousands of civilians. Many among them went into an exodus across the borders into Israel, and most of them remained in their villages and towns facing escalating oppression, which is slowly but surely developing into a systematic persecution.

In order to offer my insight and my live testimony, I will have to correct some of the misperceptions and facts about the South Lebanon enclave, the will of its population, the reality of its self defense force, and its future aspirations. Then I will make a few suggestions and recommendation for the United States policy in that area.

## **I - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SOUTH LEBANON ENCLAVE**

Over the past few months and weeks, many in the media and in diplomatic circles have wrongly described the history of the South Lebanon enclave known as the “Security Zone” - and erroneously portrayed the South Lebanon Army (SLA). That portrayal of the local population and its self defense force has not only legitimized the assault on that area, but also the abandoning of its population by all those responsible for its security and future on both sides of the borders. In sum, the people of South Lebanon, who for 23 years, have defended their identity and rights within the confines of their enclave, were forced to either flee or submit to an authoritarian regime and a new occupation. But worse than the physical tragedy was the assassination of the truth, a fact which is increasing the chances of transforming the ongoing persecution into a change in and so threat to the ethnic makeup of that area.

### **A. South Lebanese Defense Force 1976-1979**

In order to validate Hizbollah's takeover of the southern enclave of Lebanon, it was said that the SLA was a proxy militia of Israel created to assist the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon . Not only the Hizbollah and the pro-Syrian regime in Beirut have stressed this equation, but also the United Nations.

However the facts contradict this theory. The SLA was organized by local Lebanese officers and soldiers of the Lebanese Army and a handful of armed civilians as of 1976 in order to defend their villages against the PLO and the various radical groups who attempted to dominate the area during the Lebanese civil war. Those mostly officers and civilians, with the knowledge of the Lebanese Government, then formed the Lebanese Defense Forces in South Lebanon, one of the multiple militias of the Lebanon war. Short of any ideological or regional agenda, their aim was simple: To defend their villages and towns until the Lebanese Army would come to their rescue. They were headed by Major Saad Haddad who was officially in contact with the Lebanese Ministry of Defense until 1979. The Lebanese Government, not yet under Syrian control, paid the salaries of this force til the 1980s. Since 1976, this free enclave was continuously under PLO and pro-Syrian assaults. All routes of communications to Beirut, and to the main hospitals and socio-economic centers were cut off. The civilian population, abandoned by the central government was in jeopardy. As of 1977, the local militia established contacts with the Israeli military across the border to insure medical and logistical support. Therefore, the SLA was initially launched as a native paramilitary force made up by Lebanese officers and local villagers, mostly Christians, to resist the takeover by foreign forces mainly Palestinians and Syrians.

## **The Free Lebanon Army 1979-1985**

In 1978, the Christian enclaves were able to link up with each other as a result of the withdrawal of the PLO and allied forces in front of the Israeli Litani operation. During its withdrawal, the IDF remitted a number of ex-PLO positions to their Lebanese allies. In 1979, that local militia was named the “Free Lebanon Army.” The Lebanese state severed its relationship with its command. For another four years, the FLA operated as a local militia formed by native villagers and aiming at defending their area against PLO, pro-Syrian and Islamist militias. Such as did the Lebanese Forces and other militias in central and northern Lebanon, and such as did the Lebanese Army brigades during the Lebanese war, the FLA was struggling for the defense and the survival of its enclave. While dozens of other militias and Army units became the allies of Syria, Iran and the PLO, the FLA chose to become the ally of the State of Israel. From 1976 and until 1985, the South Lebanon enclave was not an extension of Israel’s military, although it acted as and believed in the alliance with the Jewish and democratic state. It faced forces such as the Hizbollah and Syrian Nationalists which acted as allies of Syria.

## **The South Lebanon Army**

During the Israeli invasion of June 1982, the FLA moved further north towards the areas evacuated by its opponents (Sidon), as did the Lebanese Forces and the Lebanese Army in the center of the country. In 1984, after the death of Major Haddad, General Antoine Lahad, a high ranking officer of the Lebanese Army was appointed at the suggestion of former President Camille Chamoun as commander of the FLA. At the request of the Israelis, the name of the militia was changed to South Lebanon Army (SLA) and it started receiving direct military training from the IDF. The future of that force was to be negotiated with the Lebanese government. When Israel withdrew southwards in 1985, the SLA made its own decision to remain in the Christian district of Jezzine. It made that decision in the aftermath of anti-Christian massacres which took place after previous Israeli withdrawals from the Shuf, Iqlim al-Kharrub and East Sidon districts (1983-1984). Here again, the deployment in the Jezzine district was a national decision made by the SLA command to protect the native population from massacres and not an Israeli decision.

As of 1995, the South Lebanon enclave was called the “Security Zone” by the Israelis. That area fell under a dual control. On the one hand, the IDF and SLA controlled a band of territory stretching from the Port of Nakura as far as the Syrian borders. In Jezzine, only the SLA was in control.

Therefore, it appears clearly from the historical background that the SLA and its predecessors the FLA and the LDF, were not other than (Christian-led) Lebanese organizations which fought in the defense of their enclaves. Furthermore, the SLA-FLA were founded by on-duty Lebanese Army officers as of 1976, paid by the Lebanese government then, and their rank and file were local and native Lebanese citizens from the villages and towns of that area.

## **II - THE POLITICAL RIGHTS OF THE SOUTH LEBANON ENCLAVE**

At a time when the various militias and groups in Lebanon were invited to national political reconciliation and while Hizbollah was left armed after the end of the war in 1990, the pro-Syrian regime in Beirut continued to wage a war against the enclave under the slogan of “elimination of pro-Israeli militias.” And while pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian organizations were armed and protected by the Beirut regime and by Syria, the SLA was considered as an enemy and was never invited to any negotiations with the government. Even those Christian forces which were associated with the national reconciliation process known as the Taif Agreement, (such as the Lebanese Forces) were gradually eliminated from the political scene between 1991 and 1995.

It is important to note that neither the SLA nor the people of South Lebanon were invited to participate in the Taif agreement process in 1989, hence were never consulted as to the future of their country. Note also that neither the SLA nor the people of the enclave were ever invited to any form of dialogue or discussion of the future of their area with the Lebanese government or the United Nations.

Therefore, it is a fact that the communities of the southern enclave in Lebanon were never consulted as to their fears, demands or future aspirations. It is also a fact that while the pro-Syrian regime and its allies from Hizbollah engaged in a decade-long war against the SLA and the Christian population of South Lebanon, most Western Governments and the United Nations did not attempt to mediate in the conflict, and sided with the oppressive pro-Syrian regime in Beirut against the enclave.

In contrast with the populations of Kosovo, East Timor and the Palestinians, the population of the southern enclave was never given the opportunity to express their will and aspirations. For although in alliance with the State of Israel, the SLA had never been allowed or able to produce political representation and the various world governments refused to grant them that opportunity. When the Israeli unilateral withdrawal took place, those populations were at the mercy of Hizbollah and the pro-Syrian regime in Beirut.

## **III HOW DID THE ENCLAVE FALL?**

The American people was allowed to hear two versions of the fall of South Lebanon. The first version is the one of Hizbollah and the pro-Syrian regime. According to their claim, they compelled the Israelis to pull out from the security zone by way of force. And because of Israel’s withdrawal, the SLA had no choice but to collapse. According to the Western version, Israel decided to withdraw unilaterally but had to hasten its pull out because of a sudden collapse of the SLA. But according to the young men and women of the SLA and the people of that region, the enclave fell because the local population was never given the right to express themselves or the right to defend themselves

### **South Lebanon’s Options**

Last July, Israel's government decided to withdraw from our area even in the absence of state agreements or international arrangements. The unilateral withdrawal was a decision made by the Israeli government which assumed sole responsibility for its decisions. However the fate of our enclave facing the threats by Hizbollah and the regime, as well as the future of this community were disregarded by all parties. To the Beirut regime and the radical Islamists, the southern enclave community was nothing but "agents and collaborators." To the Israeli government the SLA was a military force "hired" among locals to serve their security interests. To the Western world this community was made up of Lebanese citizens who had to be "returned" to their government irrespective of their fears.

No guarantees were negotiated by any party on behalf of the endangered community. Hizbollah threatened to butcher the "collaborators," the Lebanese Government issued 20,000 warrants for arrest, and the United Nations asked for the dismantlement of the SLA as a main condition for intervention after Israel's withdrawal. Israel stated it would extend political asylum to SLA personnel. It is dramatic to realize that no party offered to mediate between the local community and the regime in Beirut. Our population had two options: Either surrender to Hizbollah and the pro-Syrian regime or flee in an exodus into Israel.

### **South Lebanon's real decision**

However, I am here today to inform the US Congress and the world, that our community had decided to resist and remain on its own soil, while calling on the international community for assistance. In April, the SLA's commander, after consultation with his officers, declared his intention to remain after Israel's withdrawal. During the same month, the Civilian Committees which represent the people of the villages and towns, from Christian, Druse and Shiite backgrounds, also declared their intention to defend themselves while calling on the international community to help mediate.

During the month of May 2000 our people remitted a memorandum to the office of the United Nations in Nakura in south Lebanon offering suggestions to avoid bloodshed and exodus. During the same month delegations representing our community met with diplomats of the US, UK, and French embassies in Israel and at the United Nations. And on May 18, our representatives met with the office of the Secretary General of the United Nations in New York. We warned against offering our villages and towns to Hizbollah and the pro-Syrian militias after Israel's withdrawal due to take place before July 7.

We offered to transform the SLA into a local municipal police to operate under UN auspices as are the cases in Kosovo and East Timor. We offered to establish a local municipal authority to be democratically elected and which would manage the daily lives of the citizens of that zone until a comprehensive solution could be reached with the several governments of the region. And we committed to transfer the area gradually to the Beirut authorities as progress was made in alleviating the Syrian presence in the capital and in disarming Hizbollah, the two sources of our fears.

## **Rejection of Our Rights and Fears**

Instead of taking our demands for protection on our land seriously, the United Nations declined to assist us, acting against all international law, and particularly in contradiction with Chapter seven of the Charter. The United States, UK and France dismissed our fears and insisted on guarantees which were allegedly granted by the Beirut regime. The State of Israel only prepared for our potential exodus, ruling out our determination to remain on our land and defend ourselves. The Beirut pro-Syrian regime rejected national reconciliation with our people, rejected amnesty and committed to eliminate our political freedoms. Hizbollah's leaders made public statements about killings, even if the SLA were to flee into Israel and beyond.

## **The Last days**

Despite the abandonment by the international community and against all odds, our people decided to remain and fight for their land and rights while calling endlessly on the UN to deploy its units around our villages.

On May 22, 2000, and as Israeli units were implementing their own withdrawal and the commander of the SLA was absent in Fance, the mostly Shiite sector of the security zone collapsed. It appeared that Shiite officers were told by the Israelis that they must leave before the borders closed. Even after the invasion of Hizbollah of this area, the mostly Christian-Druse eastern enclave and the Christian western enclave, decided to defend themselves and protect their citizens after Israel's withdrawal

On May 23, 2000, at 8 PM, SLA officers in the western sector received orders from the Israelis to leave their posts as Hizbollah was advancing towards their villages. Thus the SLA was imploded from the inside and was dismantled without any battle. The main reason why the SLA did not remain and fight was the fact that the border was closed behind its back. Without access to medical and logistical supplies, our people was condemned either to surrender to its enemy or flee across the border. Our community was not allowed to defend itself nor to be protected by the UN on its own land. The only choices which were left were the exodus towards Israel's refugee camps or the exodus towards Beirut's jails.

## **III CONSEQUENCES**

### **Consequences of the Abandonment on our Community**

As a result of the collapse of the enclave, major consequences pertaining to the security, freedom and future of an entire community unfolded.

1) More than seven thousand civilians, including hundreds of SLA officers and soldiers fled through the Lebanese-Israeli borders into an exodus towards the unknown. Inside Israel they were joined by hundreds, maybe thousands of Southern Lebanese who were working in Israel. In our estimates, more than ten thousand residents of the enclave have fled either to Israel or to other destinations. To those refugees, who left their homes, belongings and properties behind,

this is a cataclysmic dimension. Not only were they abandoned by the international community, but they have no official cause recognized as such.

2) More than 1,700 members of the SLA surrendered to the Lebanese authorities and to Hizbollah. Many of those who surrendered to Hizbollah have not been identified yet. As for those who surrendered to the Beirut regime, they were sent to military courts which are identifying them as “collaborators” and not as militiamen or as a resistance group which belonged to a war faction, as was the case with other groups in Lebanon. Lebanese human rights groups are criticizing the poor standards of human rights used by the Beirut authorities while dealing with these political prisoners

3) As for the civilians who remained in their villages, they were and are still submitted to all sorts of harassment, oppression, arbitrary arrests, and ultimately in some documented cases, to murder and physical harm. Lebanese and other human rights groups have reported clearly that systematic suppression and oppression are taking place in the Christian areas of the former security zone.

3) Widespread looting and destruction of infrastructure, including water supplies, have been and are still reported. Many villages have witnessed the exodus of the majority of their residents.

By our standards, that is for a population of 100,000 people, the exodus of about 10,000, the arrest and military trial of 2,000, the issuing of warrants for the arrest of 20,000, and the ongoing persecution of our villages and towns are considered a catastrophe.

### **Consequences of the Abandonment to a Radical Force on our Area**

As a result of the Israeli withdrawal and of the dismantling of the SLA, Hizbollah and pro-Syrian forces invaded the area and occupied it. The ex-enclave, which was free from radical forces and Syrian influence until last month, is now under their military occupation. This will have serious consequences aside from the humanitarian and national tragedies affecting our community.

1) Hizbollah is a radical militia with a long record of hostage taking, assassination of diplomats, killing of US forces, bombings domestically and internationally, and above all the massacre of Christian civilians in Jezzine, Qolaia and the rest of the enclave over almost two decades. A group which is cited by the US State Department as a terror organization. Its leadership has repeatedly and openly threatened killings and massacres of whomsoever would obstruct their agenda. Hizbollah has vowed to destroy Israel, in alliance with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and has pledged to Islamicize Lebanon, which would be at the expense of its Christian communities and other moderate Muslims. Offering the Southern area of Lebanon to Hizbollah is a grave mistake.

2) For 23 years the borders between Lebanon and Israel were open, and economic, social, and educational, as well as other, ties were established between our people and the people of Israel. As soon as the Israelis withdrew and the SLA was dismantled, and after the refugees crossed the border, both Israelis and Hizbollah shut down all gates. Instead of open borders, closed frontiers. Instead of exchange and trade, enmity and isolation. It is hard to believe that shutting down gates,

and closing borders will help peace in the region. Instead of seeing Lebanese workers crossing into northern Israel to their daily jobs, we see Hizbollah's partisans exploding their hate of the Jews and throwing rocks against Israeli soldiers and civilians. That is not a step forward towards peace.

3)Furthermore, by dismantling the Lebanese-Israeli peaceful border and replacing it with Hizbollah's supporters, radical Palestinians are moving towards the area from the various camps in Lebanon, threatening to re-ignite the armed struggle against Israel. Let us note that the conflict started in Lebanon 25 years ago, when Palestinian militias attempted to occupy that border area in order to attack Israel. Surrendering this enclave to Hizbollah will bring back the most radical Palestinian forces and therefore will be responsible for a new conflict in the area.

## **IV - REACTIONS**

### **The Lebanese Government Reaction**

The Lebanese regime, which is under Syrian control, acts from pro-Syrian perspectives. Up until this present date it has not sent the regular army to replace Hizbollah and to disarm it. Our population is at the mercy of Hizbollah and of pro-Syrian militias. Under such circumstances, the refugees will not go back to their homes, and the local residents will remain under terror and repression from radical militias. Moreover, in the absence of regular troops, militias may perform mass abuse. The situation is extremely critical.

### **The United Nations**

Despite our repetitive calls and memorandums to the United Nations to deploy in our areas, the organization's top offices and its envoys refused to acknowledge the existence of a "crisis." To UN envoy Teri Larsen, it is perfectly normal that Hizbollah occupies the area and terrorizes its population, and that the SLA was dismantled. It seems normal that about 10,000 residents including women, children and the elderly went into exile. The UN officials have acted against their mandate to preserve peace, protect civilian populations, and have breached international law by not assisting an endangered community. The UN has a force of about 6,000 soldiers in South Lebanon. It prefers using them in administrative missions such as painting yellow lines to mark the international border, instead of posting units within and around the areas at the mercy of a radical militia.

### **Radical Forces**

Hizbollah and its pro-Syrian allies have pledged to punish all those who have "cooperated" with the Israelis, i.e. the majority of the population in that enclave. This was clearly illustrated by a speech of Hizbollah's leader who said his militia will "slaughter the SLA men and women in their beds." In addition to terrorizing them, Hizbollah forces are disrupting vital socio-economic infrastructure, such as water supplies, schools, medical centers, under the pretext of dismantling what was built with the help of Israel. Hizbollah leaders have even called on their associates of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to assassinate members of the ex-SLA within Israel itself.



## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In view of the above facts we cannot but conclude that the South Lebanon community, which was isolated because of a civil war and denied its political rights by the current pro-Syrian regime in Beirut, was punished for defending itself and for believing in popular and cultural peace across the border for the last quarter of a century.

This community was never heard, its aspirations never legitimized and its security and freedom never guaranteed. The international community did not listen to its fears prior to the Israeli withdrawal, and did not recognize its tragedy after it unfolded.

Moreover, the native SLA was demonized as ““collaborators”” and ““mercenaries”” while Hizbollah was upgraded and rewarded.

In sum our people in South Lebanon lives out a human tragedy today. Thousands of its youth, including young children, have gone into exile, the remaining residents live in fear and under oppression. Our socio-economic infrastructure is being dismantled. The Lebanese government and the United Nations have so far refused to protect our community inside our villages. And we fear that worse has yet to occur.

Mr Senator,  
Dear Members

Practically the South Lebanon community moved from under one occupation to another. What was portrayed as ““the liberation of south Lebanon from Israeli occupation by resistance movements,”” was also the extension into South Lebanon’s enclaves of pro-Syrian pro-Iranian forces. In sum we, the native population of South Lebanon were not liberated, but forced to leave. Those who stayed behind are not free but under oppression. And worse, our cause as refugees and oppressed is not even recognized by the international community.

### **Recommendations:**

In view of my testimony, and on behalf of the refugee population in Israel and abroad and the oppressed communities inside our area, I would like to suggest the following recommendations to the US Congress:

1) We urge the US Congress in particular and the American government in general to investigate the fate of the population of South Lebanon after the Israeli withdrawal and the invasion by Hizbollah. We call on your to send representatives to inquire about their situation, to interview them, to listen to their concerns and to establish those facts personally. I urge the US Senators and invite them to visit the refugee centers in Israel and to visit our villages in South Lebanon. That visit must be objective and neutral and not altered by local officials

2) We urge the US Government to grant a special humanitarian aid to the refugees in Israel to enable them to be absorbed momentarily until conditions change in Lebanon, enabling them to return. That special aid must include funds for schools, social aid and creation of jobs.

3) We urge the US government formally to ask the United Nations to use its already existing units, the UNIFIL, to deploy within and around the towns and villages which were targeted by Hizbollah and persecuted by pro-Syrian forces.

4) We urge the US Government to pressure the Lebanese regime to stop persecuting the South Lebanon community and to engage in a dialogue for national reconciliation. We ask the US government to intervene directly in that process, as it has done in several areas in the world.

5) We urge the US government to assist the Lebanese people in general to free their country from Syrian occupation, which by all standards is responsible for most of the country's tragedies. We call on the US government to ask Syria to initiate its full withdrawal from all of Lebanon and to ensure that free and new elections occur in Lebanon, under UN sponsorship, which would help Lebanon's society express its will and aspirations.

6) We particularly call on the US Congress to hold hearings about the fate of the Lebanese Christians in particular, as an endangered community in the Middle East and assess ways and means to enable this community to survive as the international community did for the Bosnian Muslims, the Kosovar Muslims and the Palestinians. I urge you to call on this community's spiritual leaders, political exiles and intellectuals to testify about the oppression of their community

I thank you again for the opportunity you offered me to express my point of view and represent the views of the refugee population from South Lebanon.

Colonel Charbel Barakat  
Coordinator of the Civilian Committees of South Lebanon  
Refugee in Israel